



Spain is Europe's most passionate country. It is also one of Europe's most beautiful.

This is a country full of soul-stirring landscapes – arresting mountain ranges that rise like the ramparts of natural fortresses across the country, a coastline of unrivalled variety, backed by charming seaside villages, vast horizons and glorious beaches. Spain's natural beauty is sweeping and exceptional but it's not just for looking at. The options for exploring the natural realm are endless, from hiking the high country to snorkelling the Med with so much more in between.

There's no finer introduction to the Spanish soul than through its food. Food and wine are national obsessions here with good reason. The touchstones of Spanish cooking are deceptively simple: incalculable variety, strong traditions of recipes handed down through the generations, and an innate willingness to experiment and see what comes out of the kitchen-laboratory. You may experience the best dining ever over tapas in an earthy bar where everyone's shouting, or over a meal prepared by a celebrity chef in the refined surrounds of a Michelin-starred restaurant. Either way, the breadth of gastronomic experience that awaits you is superb.

Poignantly windswept Roman ruins, castles and cathedrals of rare power, and incomparable jewels of Islamic architecture also speak of a country where the great civilisations of history have always

risen, fallen and left behind their indelible mark. More recently, what other country could produce such rebellious and relentlessly creative spirits as Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso and Antoni Gaudí and place them front and centre in public life?

For all such talk, this is a country that lives very much in the present. This book is, therefore, not broken up into sights or hotels or restaurants, or primarily into regions, but into five chapters that take you to the very epicentre of Spanish life:

- **Tradition & Passion:** Flamenco, Food & Family
- **The Good Things in Life:** Living la Buena Vida
- **Living History:** Monuments of Art & Architecture
- **Modernity:** Design, Style & Innovation in Spanish Life
- **Adventure:** Exploring Wild Spain

Spain rewards those who visit in the spirit of full immersion and this book takes you into the heart of the Spanish experience. Perhaps you'll sense it along a crowded post-midnight street when all the world has come out to play. Or maybe that moment will come when a flamenco performer touches something deep in your soul. Whenever it occurs, you'll find yourself nodding in recognition: this is a place where anything can happen.

...and with that,
welcome to Spain

Left Plaça d'Espanya, Barcelona

Contents

Introduction 2

People & Culture 6

Arts, History & Design 8

Food & Drink 10

Landscapes & Journeys12

A Day in Spain 14

Experiences by Region.....16

Northeast Spain.....18

Central Spain.....20

Northwest Spain 22

South Spain24

Tradition & Passion.....26

iOlé! Fiery Flamenco 28

Tapas: The Flavours of Spain 34

La Tomatina 40

Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage 42

Jamón Jamón 48

On the Grapevine: La Rioja 50

La Familia 56

Spain's Religious Festivals..... 60

Basque Culture 64

Tortilla: Spanish Omelette 66

The Catalan Identity..... 68

Catalonia's Human Castles 70

Galicia's Celtic Roots72

The Good Things in Life 76

Spanish Sands 78

The Perfect Paella 84

La Siesta: The Art of Napping 86

Churros y Chocolate 90

Legend & Luxury:
Stay in a Parador 92

Sipping Sherry in Jerez 94

Gazpacho: Summertime Soup..... 96

The Mountains of
Picos de Europa..... 98

Chasing Cheese
& Cider in Asturias.....102

Córdoba's Patios in Bloom 106

Salamanca: The Golden City 108

White Villages of Andalucía 110

Olive Oil: A Taste of Jaén 116

Living History120

Alhambra: The
Jewel of Granada122

Moorish Legacy124

Ancient Extremadura..... 130

Montserrat's Mountain
Monastery136

Castles & Cathedrals
Through the Ages138

Aragón: The Villages Time Forgot...142

Baby-Jumping Festival.....146

On the Trail: Horse
Riding in Andalucía.....148

Granada's Literary Legacy 150

The Land of Don Quixote152

Cantabria's
Prehistoric Cave Art156

Segovia's Roman Aqueduct.....158

Nerves of Steel: The
Swords of Toledo 160

Modernity.....162

Architecture of the Imagination164

Guggenheim: The Bilbao Effect168

Master of Illusion: Salvador Dalí.....170

Spanish Cinema..... 174

Game of Thrones on Location176

Underwater Treasures:
Museo Atlántico.....178

Pintxos Route in the
Basque Country..... 180

Kalimotxo: An Iconic
Summer Cocktail..... 186

Bucking Tradition:
The Bullfighting Debate 188

Gloriously Gay Sitges 190

Cycling the Railways
of Andalucía192

Picasso's Art & War 194

Adventure198

Hiking the Powerful Pyrenees200

El Caminito del Rey:
The Path of the King.....202

Call of the Wild204

A Rock Climber's Paradise208

Egg-splosive Flour War210

The Natural Art of Lanzarote.....212

The Inland Beach:
Playa de Gulpiyuri.....218

Epic Rail Journeys:
El Transcantábrico220

Sierra Nevada:
Hiking Las Alpujarras 222

Kitesurfing: Costa de la Luz..... 228

A Catalan Food Trail230

Fiesta of Fire: Las Fallas 236

The Unspoilt Mediterranean:
Cabo de Gata 238

Barcelona 242

The Genius of Gaudí 244

Barcelona Beyond the Crowds..... 250

FC Barcelona: More Than a Club.... 252

Dance of the Devils:
Festes de la Mercè..... 256

Cycle the City 258

The Holiday Season
in Barcelona260

Madrid 262

Madrid through the
Eyes of an Artist..... 264

Oldest Restaurant in the World..... 268

Handmade in Madrid..... 270

Sunday Afternoon:
The Hour of Vermouth 272

Sunset at Templo de Debod 274

Killing the Night 276

Index..... 280

Food & Drink

Europe's culinary powerhouse



Above Seafood paella

Spanish food is one of the culinary world's most exciting stories, not to mention one of the most enjoyable reasons to visit the country. Food stands at the centre of Spanish living, at once a grand national passion and a touchstone of daily life. Whether at work or at play, Spaniards come together over a meal and generally agree that food is one of few things that unites this notoriously argumentative country.

Whether it's in the genius of tapas – going out for tapas (called *pintxos* in the Basque Country) is a recurring ritual among Spaniards – the splendid subtlety of *jamón*, the refinement of olive oil, the wonderful world of Spanish wines, or in the sheer perfection of paella, Spanish food is built upon the subtle interplay between tradition and innovation, between complexity and simplicity. As a starting point, the laws of traditional Spanish cooking are deceptively simple: take the freshest ingredients and interfere with them as little as possible. From there, anything is possible, and the infinite variety of food, drink and gastronomic experiences here is reason alone to visit.

Spaniards love to travel in their own country. They especially love to do so in pursuit of the perfect meal. Tell a Spaniard that you're on your way to a particular place and they're sure to start salivating



Above Sangría

at the mere thought of the local speciality and a favourite restaurant at which to enjoy it. That's because eating is more than a functional pastime to be squeezed between other more important tasks; it's a social event to be enjoyed with friends and one always taken seriously enough to have adequate hours allocated for the purpose. Following in their footsteps is one of life's great pleasures.

Experiences

- Tapas: The Flavours of Spain (p34)
- La Tomatina (p40)
- Jamón Jamón (p48)
- On the Grapevine: La Rioja (p50)
- Tortilla: Spanish Omelette (p66)
- The Perfect Paella (p84)
- Churros y Chocolate (p90)
- Sipping Sherry in Jerez (p94)
- Gazpacho: Summertime Soup (p96)
- Chasing Cheese & Cider in Asturias (p102)
- Olive Oil: A Taste of Jaén (p116)
- Pintxos Route in the Basque Country (p180)
- Kalimotxo: An Iconic Summer Cocktail (p186)
- Egg-splosive Flour War (p210)
- A Catalan Food Trail (p230)
- The Oldest Restaurant in the World (p268)
- Sunday Afternoon: The Hour of Vermouth (p272)

A Day in Spain



Spain operates very much to its own schedule, and the late nights and unusually late meal times can take some getting used to for visitors.

The Spanish working day begins at home with breakfast, which is traditionally sweet – a pastry or croissant with coffee is typical. Work (and school) usually begins at 9am, although many shops don't open until 10am. Many workers break for a coffee and perhaps a snack mid-morning, around 10.30am.

Lunch is the main meal of the day. Although restaurants might open as early as 1pm, the normal time for lunch is 2pm or 2.30pm, even later on weekends or holidays. Tapas bars usually open earlier and many Spaniards will drop by for an aperitif – a pre-lunch tapa or two, and a drink. This is particularly common on weekends or during holiday periods. Although times are changing, most smaller shops close at 2pm and often don't reopen until late afternoon, usually 5pm, but sometimes 4pm. Larger shops usually stay open all day.

Lunch is a sit-down affair, consisting of a starter, a main and a dessert. Until recently, many Spaniards went home for lunch, usually followed by a siesta before

returning to work late afternoon. The demands of modern life – in Spanish cities, few workers now live close to where they work, and most lunch breaks last only an hour – mean that this is often not possible these days. In the absence of a home-cooked meal, workers commonly eat in *casas de comidas*, simple restaurants that offer cheap, home-cooked, three-course meals, known as the *menu del día*.

Modern Spanish workers finish work around 5pm or 6pm, later for those who work in smaller shops, which often don't close until 8pm. Families with small children or those who have school the next day might eat earlier, but otherwise dinner – which, like lunch, may be preceded by an aperitif in a bar – rarely begins before 9pm and is often as late as 10pm or even later, especially on weekends. In cities, nightclubs rarely open before midnight, bars rarely close before 1am (3am on weekends), and many nightclubs stay open until dawn.

Experiences by Region

South Spain

- 1 Sipping Sherry in Jerezp94
- 2 Gazpacho: Summertime Soupp96
- 3 Cordoba's Patios in Bloom.....p106
- 4 White Villages of Andalucia.....p110
- 5 Olive Oil: A Taste of Jaénp116
- 6 Alhambra: The Jewel of Granada p122
- 7 Moorish Legacy p124
- 8 On the Trail: Horse-riding in Andalucia p148
- 9 Granada's Literary Legacy p150
- 10 Underwater Treasures: Museo Atlantico..... p178
- 11 Cycling the Railways of Andalucia..... p192
- 12 El Caminito del Rey: The Path of the King.... p202
- 13 The Natural Art of Lanzarote p212
- 14 Sierra Nevada: Hiking the Alpujarras.....p222
- 15 Kitesurfing: Costa de la Luzp228
- 16 The Unspoilt Mediterranean Coast:
Cabo de Gatap238

Central Spain

- 17 Salamanca: The Golden City p108
- 18 Ancient Extremadura p130
- 19 Baby Jumping Festival p146
- 20 The Land of Don Quixote p152
- 21 Segovia's Roman Aqueduct p158
- 22 Nerves of Steel: The Swords of Toledo p160
- 23 **Madrid..... p262**
Madrid Through the Eyes of an Artist p264
- The Oldest Restaurant in the World..... p268
- Handmade in Madridp270
- Sunday Afternoon: The Hour of Vermouth....p272
- Sunset at Templo de Debod.....p274
- Killing the Night.....p276

Northeast Spain

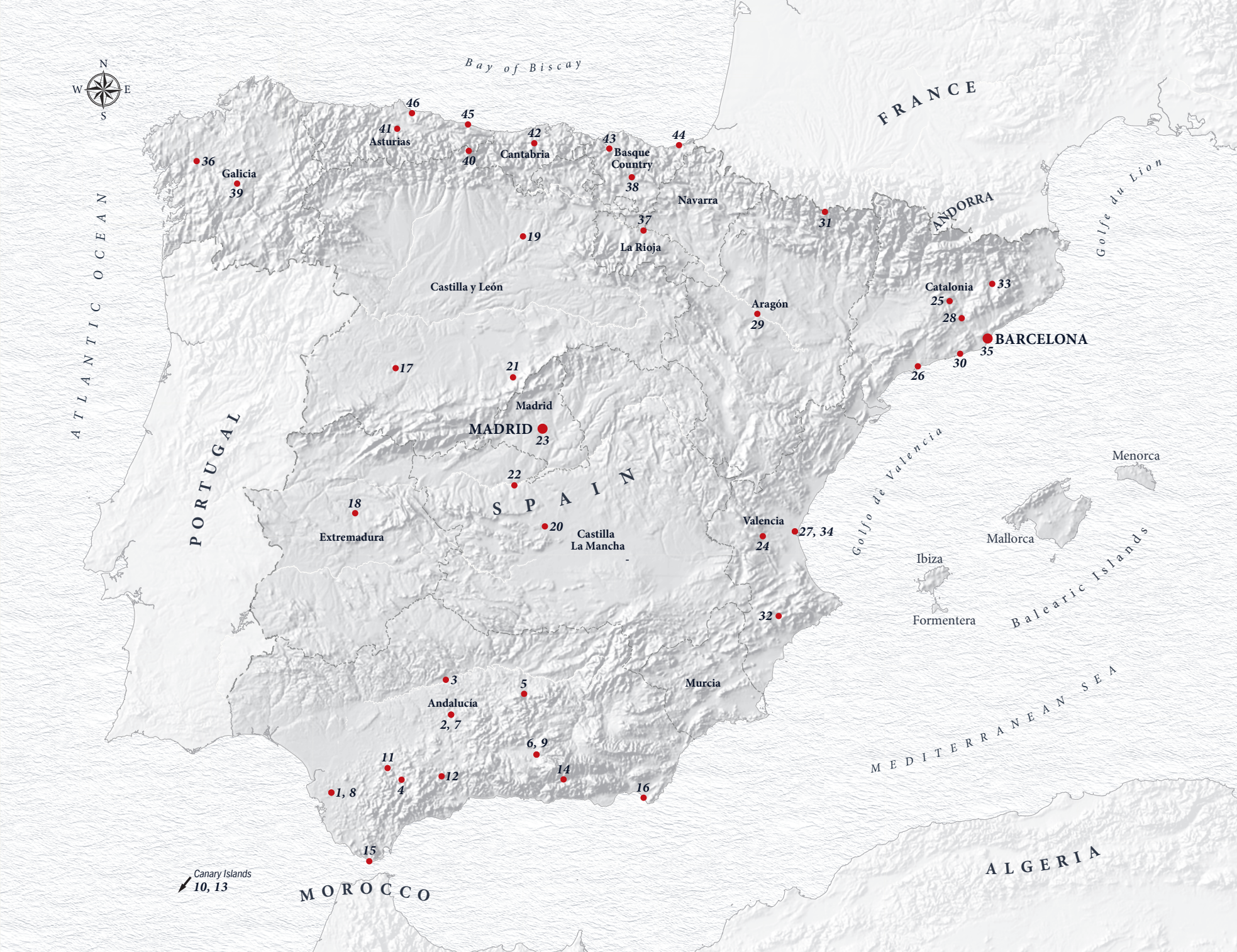
- 24 La Tomatina..... p40
- 25 The Catalan Identityp68
- 26 Catalonia's Human Castles.....p70
- 27 The Perfect Paella.....p84
- 28 Montserrat's Mountain Monastery p136
- 29 Aragón: The Villages Time Forgot p142
- 30 Gloriously Gay Sitgesp190
- 31 Hiking the Powerful Pyrenees p200
- 32 Egg-splosive Flour War..... p210
- 33 A Catalan Food Trail..... p230
- 34 Fiesta of Fire: Las Fallasp236
- 35 **Barcelona p242**
The Genius of Gaudí.....p244
- Barcelona Beyond the Crowds p250
- FC Barcelona: More than a Clubp252
- Dance of the Devils: Les Festes
de la Mercèp256
- Cycle the Cityp258
- The Holiday Season in Barcelona..... p260

Northwest Spain

- 36 Camino de Santiago Pilgrimagep42
- 37 On the Grapevine: La Rioja.....p50
- 38 Basque Culturep64
- 39 Galicia's Celtic Roots p72
- 40 The Mountains of Picos de Europa.....p98
- 41 Chasing Cheese & Cider in Asturias p102
- 42 Cantabria's Prehistoric Cave Art..... p156
- 43 Guggenheim: The Bilbao Effectp168
- 44 Pintxos Route in the Basque Countryp180
- 45 The Inland Beach: Playa de Gulpiyuri p218
- 46 Epic Rail Journeys: El Transcantábrico..... p220

Spain-wide (unmapped)

- iOlé! Fiery Flamenco..... p28
- Tapas: The Flavours of Spain p34
- Jamón Jamón..... p48
- La Familiap56
- Spain's Religious Festivalsp60
- Tortilla: Spanish Omelette p66
- Spanish Sands.....p78
- La Siesta: The Art of Napping.....p86
- Churros y Chocolatep90
- Legend & Luxury: Stay in a Parador p92
- Castles & Cathedrals
Through the Ages.....p138
- Architecture of the Imaginationp164
- Master of Illusion: Salvador Dalí p170
- Spanish Cinema p174
- Game of Thrones on Location p176
- Kalimotxo: An Iconic Summer
Cocktailp186
- Bucking Tradition: The Bullfighting
Debate.....p188
- Picasso's Art & Warp194
- Call of the Wild.....p204
- A Rock Climber's Paradise.....p208



Northeast Spain



Above **Park Güell**, Barcelona

Irresistible Mediterranean appeal

The economic engine of the country, northeastern Spain is something of a world apart. Catalonia has always sought to assert its own identity, at times within the Spanish union, at times not, especially in recent decades. And yet, from here, and from Valencia, the Balearic Islands and Aragón, come so many characteristics that the world has come to know as quintessentially Spanish.

Valencia is less the home of paella than its birthplace, and is also known for its iconic festivals. The story of Spain and its powerful historical kings could not have happened without Sos del Rey Católico, located in the rolling, pre-Pyrenean hill country of Aragón and the 15th-century birthplace of Fernando II. For better or

worse, Fernando II would, with Isabel, unite Spain, end seven centuries of Muslim occupation and cement Spain's Christian identity in perpetuity. And the essence of Spain's Mediterranean appeal – its balmy climate, its postcard-pretty beaches, its feel-good summers – very much resides in the country's northeast.

The irresistible energy of Spain's cities finds a highpoint in Barcelona, where architecture serves as a signpost to Spain's free-wheeling creativity in the city-wide creations of Antoni Gaudí. Food, too, dominates life here to the point of obsession. Barcelona is one serious food city in its own right with celebrity chefs, gastronomic societies and astonishing variety, drawing as it does on an extraordinarily

rich landscape of *mar y montaña* (sea and mountains), of centuries-old traditions and a love of everything new. And it is in the hinterland, from the Pyrenees with their beautiful mountains and Romanesque churches to Salvador Dalí's zany legacy in the Costa Brava, that many of Spain's original attractions reside.

Spanish is spoken and universally understood in these parts, but you'll also hear Catalan (which can sound like a mix of Spanish, French and Italian) and a host of dialects up and down the Mediterranean coast.



Above **Sant Joan de Boi church**, Catalonia

Central Spain



Above Gran Vía, Madrid

Window to the Spanish soul

Welcome to the Spanish heartland. It was here in the Spanish interior, high atop the *meseta* (plateau) in what we now know as Castilla y Leon, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and Madrid, that the Spanish character was forged. So many essential elements of Spanish culture spring from here, from the Castilian language itself to culinary mainstays such as roasted meats and hearty soups and stews, not to mention *mancheño* cheese and some of the country's best *jamón* varieties, air-dried by the sere winds of the Spanish high country. This climate – bitterly cold winters, searingly hot summers – is so powerful that it dictates everything from the rhythms and seasons of daily life in the region to the food and character of

the people. In the depths of winter, central Spain's inhabitants hunker down, taking refuge in their cities and villages and in their cuisine. Come summer, they evacuate to the beach.

Down through history, the kings of Castilla have held the line here, building a wonderful world of castles atop seemingly every rocky crag and fortress-like cities such as Segovia and Toledo. When it came time in 1561 for a capital to be chosen for all eternity, Felipe II chose Madrid because he wanted 'a city fulfilling the function of a heart located in the middle of the body'. Across the Spanish interior, ancient stone villages that time forgot keep alive the traditions of Old Spain as

a necessary counterpoint to the energy and drive that so distinguish the cities of contemporary Spain. More than anything else, it is this sense of history that defines the region.

Yes, there are Roman ruins across the region, and the architecture is very often sublime. But central Spain is no hoary old museum piece. This is also the land of Don Quixote, Cervantes' quirky literary creation for the ages, and of Madrid, one of the most dynamic cities on the planet.



Northwest Spain



Above La Rioja

Dramatic coastlines and unique cultures

One of Spain's least-known corners, northwestern Spain – Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, La Rioja and the Basque Country – is the antithesis of Spain's reputation for 'sun, sand and sangría'. Buffeted for the most part by strong Atlantic winds, Galicia in particular has an unpredictable climate of cold winters and sometimes disappointing summers. But there is nothing disappointing about finding so many experiences that you just don't find elsewhere, including Celtic cultural roots, dramatic cliffs and stunning fishing villages along Spain's most dramatic coastline, and food and festivals about which everyone else in Spain is known to salivate.

Food is a recurring theme up here. San Sebastián could lay claim to being

Europe's favourite culinary capital, with more Michelin stars per capita attached to its restaurants than any other city on earth, quite apart from being utterly gorgeous as a stately relic from Europe's belle époque. The Basque love of food – creative *pintxos* (Basque tapas), steaks and seafood – sees food elevated to an art form. And perhaps more than any other region up here, the Basques see themselves as different and one look at their language alone – Basque is an ancient language with no known links to any other modern tongue – will tell you why. For all their tradition, the Basques and their neighbours in La Rioja pride themselves on that tradition–innovation seesaw that is such a feature in modern Spain. This is



Above Squid with caramelised onion

Spain's most creative culinary laboratory and Bilbao's Guggenheim is the architectural poster child for the New Spain, but the Basques will most likely sip on a time-honoured Rioja red while they enjoy them.

Just across the provincial border, in Asturias and Cantabria, it's a land of cider and strong cheeses and hearty winter stews. The coastal villages here are intimate and as beautiful as any in Spain, cities like Gijón and Oviedo are up-and-coming artistic hubs, and the Picos de Europa could just be Europe's most arresting vertical sight, with hiking possibilities at every turn.

South Spain



Above Arcos de la Frontera

The cradle of quintessential Spain

If there is a region that most conforms to the Spanish stereotype, it's the country's south. Andalucía in particular is a world of whitewashed villages clinging to mountain perches – Ronda, Arcos de la Frontera and the other-worldly Alpujarras, for example – and cities of exotic architectural magnificence, most notably in Granada, Seville and Córdoba. There is something about a cobblestone street fronted by perfect whitewash and bedecked by cascading bougainvillea that screams 'Spain!' like few other images. Except perhaps the delicate horseshoe arches of Córdoba's Mezquita. Or the exquisite grandeur of Granada's Alhambra against the snow-capped backdrop of the Sierra Nevada. Or the orange trees and horse-drawn

carriages and hanging *jamóns* in every bar in Seville. Baked by fierce summers and grateful for mild winters, Andalucía is a caricature of the Spanish experience.

Andalucía and its oft-forgotten neighbour Murcia are also large enough to offer up surprises, adding depth and variety to a journey here. Málaga is a Mediterranean city par excellence, rich in art galleries and a love of life Spanish-style. Carefree Cádiz just happens to be one of the oldest cities in Europe. And the region's wild landscapes are much underrated – the Sierra Nevada is brilliant for summer hiking and winter skiing, a network of protected parks receive few visitors, and wildlife, including the world's most endangered cat species, the charismatic Iberian



Above Cádiz

lynx, as well as flamingos, inhabit pretty valleys and the world-class Parque Nacional de Doñana. Not far away, the triangle of Jerez de la Frontera, El Puerto de Santa María and Sanlúcar de Barrameda could just be the sherry capital of the world, not to mention the wellspring of flamenco, that most Spanish of musical genres.

They speak Spanish down here and are very proud to do so, but the southern version of the language can take some getting used to. In keeping with their relaxed approach to life, locals speak a casual form that often truncates words in a way that can be difficult for first-timers to understand.

Index

A

Abaco Té 151
accommodation
 Camino de Santiago 45-7
 Costa de la Luz 229
 paradores 92-3
aceite de oliva virgen 119
actors 174-5
adventure 198-241, *see also* canyoning,
 cycling, hiking, kitesurfing, rock
 climbing
Aiguablava 81
Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici
 200
Aínsa 145
ajo blanco 97
Al-Andalus 125
Albarracín 145
Alcántara 134
Alcazaba (Alhambra) 122
Alcazaba (Trujillo) 132
Alcázar 127-8
Alcázar de Segovia 141
Alhambra 122-3
Aljafería 128
Almería 238-41
Almodóvar, Pedro 163, 175, 277
Alpujarras 25, 222-7
Alquézar 145, 209
Altamira 9, 157, 220
Amenábar, Alejandro 175
Andalucía 25

Alhambra 122-3
beaches 80, 82
Córdoba’s patios 106-7
cycling 192-3
festivals 33, 60
flamenco 28-33
gazpacho 96-7
hiking 192-3, 202-3, 222-7
history 125
horse riding 148-9
kitesurfing 228-9
olive oil 116-19
rock climbing 209
sherry 94-5
tapas 36, 39
white villages 110-15
wildlife 205, 206
animals 98, 204-7, *see also*
 individual animals
Aparicio, Juan Pedro 220
aqueducts 158-9
Aragón 142-5
archaeological sites
 Cantabria 156-7
 Extremadura 130-5
 Segovia 158-9
 Templo de Debod 274-5
architects
 Calatrava, Santiago 166
 Cerdà, Ildefons 247
 Domènech i Montaner, Lluís 247
 Foster, Norman 166
 Gaudí, Antoni 244-9, 251, 259

Gehry, Frank 54, 166, 169
Manrique, César 212-17
Mayer, Jürgen 166
Miralles, Enric 166
Moneo, Rafael 166
Nouvel, Jean 166
Puig i Cadafalch, Josep 138, 247
architecture
 Alhambra 122-3
 aqueducts 158-9
 castles & cathedrals 138-41
 Catalan 251
 Christian-Mudéjar 127-8, 176
 Córdoba’s patios 106-7
 Gaudí 244-9, 251
 Gothic 138-41, 251
 Gothic-Mudéjar 138
 Islamic 126-7
 lanzaroteño 215
 Museo Guggenheim Bilbao 168-9
 modern 164-7
 Modernista 244-9, 251
 Moorish 124-9
 Romanesque 138-41
Arcos de la Frontera 25, 112
arranque roteño 97
art
 Christ of St John of the Cross 170
 Crossing the Rubicon 179
 El dos de mayo 266
 El tres de mayo 266
 Guernica 196-7, 266
 La familia de Carlos IV 266

Las meninas 265
Pinturas negras 266
Taxi plujós 170
The Human Gyre 179
The Persistence of Memory 170
art galleries, *see* museums & galleries
artisan workshops 226
artists
 Bourgeois, Louise 169
 Dalí, Salvador 19, 170-3, 174, 195, 196
 de Caires Taylor, Jason 179
 Goya, Francisco José de 265
 Koons, Jeff 169
 Manrique, César 212-17
 Picasso, Pablo 163, 194-7, 266
 Velázquez, Diego 265-6
arts & crafts 8-9, 160-1, 270-1
Arzak 183
Asiego 104
Asociación de Amigos de los
 Patios Cordobeses 106
Asturias 23
 beaches 218-19
 cheese 102-5
 cider 102-5, 184
 wildlife 206
az-zait 119

B

Baby-Jumping Festival 146-7
Balearic Islands 82
Banderas, Antonio 175

Barcelona 19, 242-61
 architecture 244-9
 barrios 250-1
 bicycle travel 258-9
 festivals 256-7
 football 252-5
 holiday season 260-1
Bardem, Javier 175
Barranco de Poqueira 226
barrios 250-1, 277-9
Basque Country 23
 culture 64-5
 festivals 64
 games 64
 kalimotxo 186-7
 language 23, 64
 lauburu 64
 pintxos 36, 54, 180-5
Bassa Rodona 191
Batalla del Vino 55
bathhouses 127
beaches 78-83
 Aiguablava 81
 Balearic Islands 82
 Barcelona 259
 Cabo de Gata 82, 238-41
 Costa Blanca 82
 Costa Brava 82
 Costa de la Luz 82, 228
 Costa del Sol 80, 82
 Formentera 82
 Fornells 81
 Ibiza 81

Illas Cies 81
Menorca 81
Platja de Migjorn 81
Platja de Ses Salines 81
Playa Blanca 178-9
Playa de Gulpiyuri 218-19
Playa de la Concha 81
Playa de Torimbia 81
Praia As Catedrais 81
Punta Paloma 81, 228
Sitges 191
 Trucador Peninsula 81
bears 98, 206
beer 75
Benedictine Monestir de
 Montserrat 136-7
Beyond Santiago 47
Bicing 259
bicycle travel 192-3, 258-9
Bilbao 168-9
birdlife 98, 206, *see also* wildlife
Black Madonna 136-7
Bodegón Alejandro 184
botifarra 234
Bourgeois, Louise 169
Brenan, Gerald 225
Briones 55
brown bear 206
Bubión 226
bullfighting 114, 188-9
Bunkers del Carmel 251
Buñol 40-1
Buñuel, Luis 151, 170, 174-5
Burgos 138

C

cable cars 100, 137
Cabo de Gata 82, 238-41
Cabrales cheese 98, 100, 102, 104
Cáceres 133-4
Cádiz 25
 beaches 82
 horse riding 148
 kitesurfing 228
Café Alameda 150-1
caga tió 261
caganer 261
Calatrava, Santiago 166
calçots 234
caminos
 Andalucía 148
 Beyond Santiago 47
 Camino de la Costa 47
 Camino de Santiago 13, 42-7
 Camino Francés 44
 Camino del Norte 47
 Camino Lebaniego 47
 Camino Portugués 47
 Camino Primitivo 47
 Camino Vasco-Riojano 47
 El Caminito del Rey 202-3
 Las Alpujarras 224-5
 Vía de la Plata 47
Camp Nou 253
Campo de Criptana 154
Can Xel 234
Canary Islands 178-9, 212-17

Cantabria 23, 156-7, 220
canyoning 145, 209
capes 271
Capileira 226
Carmona 112
Carnaval 191
Casa Batlló 248, 259
Casa de las Conchas 133
Casa Museo César Manrique 216
Casa Museu Dalí 172
Casa Riera Ordeix 233-4
Castell de Púbol 172-3
castells 69, 70-1
Castilla-La Mancha 21
 Don Quixote 152-5
 swords of Toledo 160-1
Castilla y León 21
 aqueducts 158-9
 festivals 146-7
 Salamanca 108-9
 wildlife 206
Castillo de Zafra 177
castles 138-41
 Alhambra 122-3
 Alcázar de Segovia 141
 Castell de Púbol 172-3
 Castillo de Zafra 177
Castrillo de Murcia 146-7
Castro, Enrique ‘Quini’ 255
Catalonia 19
 beaches 82
 bullfighting 189
 cuisine 230-5

Catalonia *continued*
culture 68-9, 70-1
Dalí Triangle 170
dancing 69
festivals 69
flag 69
human castles 70-1
language 69
LGBT travellers 190-1
Montserrat 136-7
rock climbing 209
cathedrals 138-41
Catedral de Santa María de la Redonda 54
Catedral de Santa María de la Sede 141
Catedral de Santiago de Compostela 140
Catedral de Sevilla 140-1
La Sagrada Familia 247-8
Santiago de Compostela Cathedral 74
cave art 156-7
caves
Altamira 9, 157, 220
Cueva de Covalanas 157
Cueva de El Castillo 157
Jameos del Agua 216
celebrations 59
Celtic roots 72-5
Central Spain 20-1
Centro de Arte Reina Sofía 196-7, 266
Centro de Interpretación Olivar y Aceite 119
Cerdà, Ildefons 247
Chamberí 279
cheese 98, 102-5, 145
Cheese & Cider Route 104
cheesemaking 104
chigres 102
chocolate 90-1, 234
Christmas 261
Chueca 279

churches
Capilla Real 140
Church of Sant Andreu 251
Church of Salvador de Sarria 44
Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida 267
Iglesia de Rocamador 134
Iglesia de San Martín 138
Iglesia de Santa Maria 154
Iglesia Prioral de Santa María de la Asunción 112
Parròquia de Sant Pacià 251
churros 90-1
cider 102-5, 184
cinema 174-5
Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias 166
classical guitars 271
cochinillo asado 268
Coixet, Isabel 175
Concurso de Cante Jondo 151
Consuegra 154
Convento de San Benito 134
cordero asado 268
Córdoba 25
gazpacho 97
Mezquita 126-7
patios 106-7
correfoc 256
corridas 189
Costa Blanca 82
Costa Brava 82
Costa de la Luz 82, 228-9
Costa del Sol 80, 82
cows 98
Cruz, Penelope 175
cubism 196, 197
Cueva de Covalanas 157
Cueva de El Castillo 157
cuina volcànica 234
culture 6-7
Basque 64-5
bullfighting 188-9

Catalan 68-9
Don Quixote 152-5
family 56-9
flamenco 28-33
Galicia 72-5
sherry 94-5
vermouth 272-3
wine 50-5

Catalan 68-9
Don Quixote 152-5
family 56-9
flamenco 28-33
Galicia 72-5
sherry 94-5
vermouth 272-3
wine 50-5

cycling
Andalucía 192-3
Barcelona 258-9

D

daily life 15, 89
Dalí, Gala 170-3
Dalí, Salvador 19, 170-3, 174, 195, 196
dance
Basque 64
flamenco 28-33
folk 69
sardana 69
de Caires Taylor, Jason 179
de Cervantes, Miguel 152-5
de Falla, Manuel 151
de León, Luis 108
de los Peines, La Niña 31, 33
deep water soloing (DWS) 209
del Toro, Guillermo 175
Denominación de Origen (DOC) classifications 55, 75, 119, 145
design 8-9, 162-97
devil 146, 159, 256-7
directors 174-5
Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, The 175
Domènech i Montaner, Lluís 247
Don Quixote 21, 152-5
Don Quixote 154
doughnuts 90-1

drinks 10-11
beer 75
cider 102-5
kalimotxo 186-7
sherry 94-5
vermouth 272-3
wine 50-5

E

El Acueducto 158-9
El Caminito del Rey 202-3
El Carmel 251
El Celler de Can Roca 234
El Chorro 202, 208, 209
El espíritu de la colmena 175
El laberinto del fauno 175
El Maestrazgo 145
El Meandro del Melero 133
El Naranjo de Bulnes 100
El Palmar 228
El Pinsapar 115
El Quijote 152-5
El Rastro 273
El Rinconcillo 150
El Rocío 60
El Toboso 154
El Torcal de Antequera 209
El Torreón 115
El Transcantábrico 220
Elche 60
Elciego 54-5
Elkano 184
Els Enfarinats 210-11
Éluard, Paul 170
Embalse de Zahara 113
employment 59
encierro 64
Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida 267
Ermita de Sant Joan 137
Ernst, Max 173
Extremadura 21, 130-5

F

fallas 237
family life 56-9
farmsteads 225-6
FC Barcelona 252-5
Feria del Caballo 148
Fernando II 144
festivals 7, 64, 69
Baby-Jumping Festival 146-7
Batalla del Vino 55
Carnaval 191
Els Enfarinats 210-11
Feria del Caballo 148
Festes de la Mercè 256-7
Festival de la Sidra Natural 105
Festival de Santa Tecla 71
Festival del Teatro Clásico 131
Fiesta de los Patios de Córdoba 106
flamenco 33
La Tomatina 40-1
Las Fallas de San José 236-7
Los Empalaos 62-3
Misteri d’Elx 60, 62
Moros y Cristianos 63
religious 60-3
Romería del Rocío 60
Sanfermines 64
Semana Santa 60
Sitges Pride 191
fideuà 84
Figueres 170
film & TV locations 176-7, 241
films 174-5
fino 94
fireworks 41, 62, 71, 236-7
Fisterra (Finisterre) 47
flamenco 28-33
festivals 33
performances 33
shoes 271

flamingos 206
flowers 106-7
folk dancing 69
folk music 72
Font de Canaletes 253
food 10-11, 126
Aragón 145
Catalan 230-5
cheese 98, 102-5, 145
churros y chocolate 90-1
Galician 74-5
gazpacho 96-7
jamón 48-9, 145
jamón ibérico 48, 233
jamón serrano 48, 225
llonganissa 233-4
oldest restaurant in the world 268-9
olive oil 116-19
paella 84-5
pintxos 36, 54, 180-5
seafood 74-5, 84, 184
tapas 34-9
tortilla 66-7
football 252-5
For Whom the Bell Tolls 115
Formentera 82
Fornells 81
Foster, Norman 166
Franco, Francisco 64, 69, 80, 86, 163, 175, 253

G

Galicia 23
cuisine 74-5
culture 72-5
folk music 72
language 72
train journeys 220-1
wine 75
galleries, *see* museums & galleries
Game of Thrones 163, 176-7
Garganta del Cares 98, 101

Garganta Verde 115
Gaudí, Antoni 244-9, 251
gay travellers 190-1
gazpacho 96-7
Gehry, Frank 54, 166, 169
Generalife 122
Gernika 197
Girona 234
gorges
El Chorro 202, 209
El Tajo 114
Garganta del Cares 98, 101
Garganta Verde 115
Los Cahorros 209
Río Sella 209
Goya, Francisco José de 145, 265-7
Granada 25
Alhambra 122-3
history 125
literature 150-1
South from Granada 225
teahouses 150-1
Granadilla 132-3
Grazalema 113
griffon vultures 115, 192, 206, 209
Guadalupe 132
Guernica 163, 196-7
guitars 270-1

H

Hable con ella 175
hammams 127
handmade goods 226
Haro 55
Hemingway, Ernest 115, 259, 269, 276
hiking 199
Andalucía’s *vías verdes* 192-3
Cabo de Gata 82
Camino de Santiago 42-7
Costa Brava 82
El Caminito del Rey 202-3
El Chorro 202-3

Garganta del Cares 101
Garganta Verde 115
Las Alpujarras 23, 222-7
Montserrat 137
Picos de Europa 98
Pyrenees 200-1
Sierra de Grazalema 113, 115
Sierra Nevada 222-7
history 8-9, 120-161
Alhambra 122
Aragón 144
Cantabria 156-7
Extremadura 130-5
flamenco 29-33
gazpacho 97
Granada 150-1
paradores 92-3
Middle Ages 160
Romans 158-9
Spanish Civil War 86, 175, 192, 197, 251, 253, 266, 279
sword-making 160-1
tapas 36-7
Templo de Debod 274-5
wine 53
hojiblanco 119
holiday season 260-1
horse riding 148-9
horses 148-9
Horta 251
Huertas 277
human castles 69, 70-1

I

Iberian lynx 206
Iberian wolf 98, 205-6
Ibi 210
islands
Balearic Islands 82
Canary Islands 178-9, 212-17
Iles Medes 82
Illas Cíes 81
San Juan de Gaztelugatxe 176

Ibiza 82
Iglesia de Rocamador 134
Iglesia de San Martín 138
Iglesia de Santa Maria 154
Iglesia Prioral de Santa María de la Asunción 112
innovation 162-97
Isabel I 144
Itálica 176

J

Jaén 116-19
Jameos del Agua 216
James the Greater 42
jamón 48-9, 145
jamón ibérico 48, 233
jamón serrano 48, 225
Jerez de la Frontera 94, 148
Jewish quarters 160
journeys 12-13

K

Kafe Botanika 180
kalimotxo 186-7
King Pedro 128
Kings’ Day 261
kitesurfing 228-9
Koons, Jeff 169
Kursaal Palace 166

L

La Cuchara de San Telmo 184
la familia 56-9
la hora del vermut 272-3
La Latina 277
La Moreneta 136-7
la movida madrileña 175, 277
La Paloma 166
La Pedrera 248
La Prórroga 253

La Rioja 23, 50-5
La Sagrada Família 247-8
la siesta 86-9
La Tahá 226
La Taverna de Barcelona 253
La Tomatina 40-1
La Viña 184
landscapes 12-13
languages
 Basque 23, 64
 Catalan 69
 Galician 72
Lanjarón 226
Lanzarote 178-9, 212-17
lammergeiers 98
Lago de la Ercina 98
Laguardia 55
Las Alpujarras 25, 222-7
Las Fallas de San José 236-7
lauburu 64
Les Cols 234
LGBT travellers 190-1
Little Brown One 136-7
Little Riglos 209
llonganissa 233-4
Logroño 54
Lorca, Federico García 151
Los Barruecos 177
Los Cahorros 209
Los Empalaos 62-3
Los Mallos 209
lynxes 206

M

Madrid 21, 262-79
 art 196-7, 264-7
 barrios 277, 279
 culture 272-3
 history 274-5
 food 268-9
 handmade goods 270-1
 nightlife 276-9

Mairena, Antonio 31
Maisor 184
Málaga 25, 195
Mallorca 209
Maman 169
Manrique, César 212-17
Marchena, Pepe 31
markets
 El Rastro 273
 Mercado de la Bretxa 182
 Mercat de la Boqueria 232-3
 Mercat de Santa Caterina 166

marriage 59
Martín Berasategui
 Restaurant 183
Mau Mau Underground 253
Mayer, Jürgen 166
Mecina Bombarón 225
Menorca 81
Mercado de la Bretxa 182
Mercat de la Boqueria 232-3
Mercat de Santa Caterina 166
Mérida 131
Messi, Lionel 255
Metropol Parasol 166
Mezquita 106, 126-7
Mezquita del Cristo de la Luz 160
Middle Ages 160
mileuristas 59
Mimo San Sebastián 182
Mina 183
Miralles, Enric 166
Misteri d’Elx 60, 62
modern family life 59
Modernisme 194-7
modernity 162-97
Mohammed V 128
monasteries
 Convento de San Benito 134
 Monasterio de la Oliva 138
 Monastir de Pedralbes 251

Montserrat 136-7
Real Monasterio de Santa María de Guadalupe 132
Moneo, Rafael 166
monks 137
Montoya, José González 240
Montserrat 136-7
Moorish culture 150-1
Moorish rule 124-9
Moros y Cristianos 63
mountains 199
 Andalucian 148
 Cordillera Cantábrica 205
Montserrat 136-7
Picos de Europa 98-101
Pyrenees 200

Mugaritz 183
Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios 175

Mulhacén 225
museums & galleries
 Casa Museo César Manrique 216
 Casa Museu Dalí 172
 Castell de Púbol 172-3
 Centro de Arte Reina Sofía 196-7, 266
 Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida 267
 Lanzarote 212-6
 Museo Atlántico 178-9
 Museo de Artesanía Textil 113
 Museo de La Frontera y Los Castillos 114
 Museo de la Rioja 54
 Museo del Prado 265-6
 Museo Guggenheim Bilbao 166, 168-9
 Museo Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo 216
 Museo Lara 115
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano 131
 Museo Picasso Málaga 195

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza 266
Museu de l’Embotit 234
Museu Picasso 195-6
Teatre-Museu Dalí 170
Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando 266
Real Fábrica de Tapices 266
music
 Celtic 72
 flamenco 28-33
 jazz 277
Muslim rule 124-9
Muxía 47

N

Napoleon 47, 122, 137
napping 86-9
national parks & reserves
 Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici 200
 Illas Cies 81
 Parque Nacional de Doñana 206
 Parque Nacional de Timanfaya 214
 Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido 200
 Parque Nacional de Timanfaya 214
 Parque Natural de Cabo de Gata-Níjar 82
 Parque Natural de Somiedo 206
 Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema 113
 Picos de Europa 98-9
New Year 261
nightlife 191, 276-9
Northeast Spain 18-19
Northern Spain 42-7, 50-5, 98-101
Northwest Spain 22-3
Nouvel, Jean 166

O

olive groves 225-6
olive oil 116-19

olives 116-19
Olvera 113-14
Ortiueira 72
Osborne Bull 189
Osborne Mann, Thomas 189

P

paella 84-5
palaces
 Alcázar (Seville) 127-8
 Alhambra 122-3
 Aljafería (Zaragoza) 128
 Palacio de Don Pedro 128
 Palacio de Viana 106
 Palacio Real 266-7
 Palacios Nazaríes 122
 Palau Güell 248
 Real Alcázar 176
Palaeolithic art 156-7
Palau Güell 248
Pampaneira 226
Pamplona 64
Pan’s Labyrinth 175
paradores 92-3
Park Güell 248, 251, 259
Parque del Buen Retiro 273
Parque Nacional de Doñana 206
Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido 200
Parque Nacional de Timanfaya 214
Parque Natural de Cabo de Gata-Níjar 82
Parque Natural de Somiedo 206
Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema 113
Picos de Europa 98-9

New Year 261
nightlife 191, 276-9
Northeast Spain 18-19
Northern Spain 42-7, 50-5, 98-101
Northwest Spain 22-3
Nouvel, Jean 166

people 6-7, 86-89
Catalonia 68-9, 70-1
family life 56-9
Galicia 72-5
Roma 29, 31, 35

Picasso, Pablo 163, 194-7, 266
Picos de Europa 98-101
pilgrim hostels 42, 45, 47
Pilgrim’s Passport 42
pintxos 11, 36, 54, 180-5, 220
planning 14-15
plants 106-7
Platja de Migjorn 81
Platja de Ses Salines 81
Playa Blanca 178-9
Playa de Gulpiyuri 218-19
Playa de la Concha 81
Playa de Torimbia 81
Plaza Mayor (Salamanca) 108
popular culture 176-7
Praia As Catedrais 81
pueblos blancos 110-15
Puente Nuevo 114
Puente Romano 131
Puerta del Sol 266
Puerta de Villa 132
Puerto Lápice 154
Puig i Cadafalch, Josep 138, 247
Punta Paloma 81, 228
Puppy 169
Pyrenees 200-1

R

rafting 209
railways 192
Ramírez, Jose 271
RCD Espanyol 255
Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando 266
Real Alcázar 176
Real Fábrica de Tapices 266
Real Monasterio de Santa María de Guadalupe 132

recipes
 churros y chocolate 91
 gazpacho 97
 kalimotxo 187
 tortilla 67
Reconquista 63, 98, 122, 144
refugios 42, 45, 47
religion 59
religious festivals 60-3
Restaurant El Jardinet 234
Restaurante Kokotxa 183
Restaurante Sobrino de Botín 268-9
Reyes Católicos 144
Riglos 209
Rioja Alavesa 53
Rioja Alta 53
Rioja Baja 53
Rocambolesc 234
rock climbing 100, 208-9
Roman aqueduct 158-9
Roman ruins 130-5
Romería del Rocío 60
Roncesvalles 44
Ronda 25, 114-15
running of the bulls 64
Ruta’l Quesu y la Sidra 104

S

Salamanca 108-9
Salamanca University 108
salmorejo cordobés 97
San Juan de Gaztelugatxe 176
San Sebastián 23, 180, 182, 183
Sanfermines 64
Sant Andreu de Paloma 251
Sant Climent de Taüll 138
Santiago de Compostela 42
Santiponce 176
Sanz de Sautuola, Marcelino 157
sardana 69
Sarrià (Barcelona) 251
Sarria (Galicia) 44

sculptures 178-9
seafood 74-5, 84, 184
Segovia 158-9
Semana Santa 60
Setenil de las Bodegas 114
Sevilla 148
Seville 25
 Alcázar 127-8
 Catedral de Sevilla 140-1
 flamenco 28-33
 gazpacho 96-7
 Real Alcázar 176
 Semana Santa 60
sherry 94-5
Sidrería Petritegi 184
sidrerías 102, 104
Sierra de Grazalema 115
Sierra de Guara 209
Sierra Nevada 25, 222-7
siesta tradition 86
Sinagoga del Transito 160
Sitges 190-1
sleeping 86-9, 92-3
soccer 252-5
Sondika Airport 166
Sos del Rey Católico 144
soup 96-7
South from Granada 225
South Spain 24-5
Spain’s Lost Generation 59
Spanish capes 271
Spanish cinema 174-5
Spanish Civil War 86, 175, 192, 197, 251, 253, 266, 279
Spanish guitar 270-1
Spanish life 162-97
Spanish omelette 66-7
Spanish Reconquista 63, 98, 122, 144

St James the Apostle 42
stadiums 253
stone art 72, 74
storks 206
style 162-97
surrealism 170-3, 175
swords 160-1

T

tabancos 94
Tabernas Desert 240-1
Tajo gorge 114
tapas 34-9, *see also pintxos*
Tarifa 228-9
Tarragona 70-1
teahouses 150-1
Teatre-Museu Dalí 170
Teatro Romano 131
television & film locations 176-7, 241
Templo de Debod 274-5
tempranillo 53
tertulia 150
Tetería Dar Ziryab 151
Tetería Kasbah 151
Tetería Nazarí 151
teterías 150-1
Todo sobre mi madre 175
Toledo 160-1
Toro de Osborne 188
Torre Glòries 166
Torre, Manuel 31
tortilla 66-7
traditional family life 59
train journeys 220-1
Transcantábrico train 220-1
Trevélez 225
Trucador Peninsula 81

Trujillo 131-2
turrón 261
txotx 184

Un *chien andalou* 175
Unesco World Heritage sites
 Alcázar (Seville) 127-8
 Cantabria 156-7
 Park Güell 248
 Camino de Santiago 13, 42-7
 Segovia 158-9
 Toledo 160-1

V

Valencia 19
 cuisine 84-5
 festivals 40-1, 236-7
Valencia de Alcántara 134
Válor 224-5
Véjer de la Frontera 228
Velázquez, Diego 265-6
vermouth 272-3
Vía de la Plata 47
via ferrate 209
vías verdes (greenways)
 Vía Verde de la Sierra 114, 192
 Vía Verde de la Sierra Norte 192
 Vía Verde de Riotinto 192
 Vía Verde del Aceite 192
villages 110-15, 142-5
Virgen de Montserrat 136-7
Virgin Mary 137, 248
volcanic landscapes 212-17
vultures 98, 115, 192, 206, 209

W

walking, *see* hiking
Way of St James 42-7
weddings 59
Westeros 176
white villages 110-15
wildlife 98, 204-7, *see also individual animals*
windmills 154
windsurfing 228
wine classifications 53, 75
wine regions
 Briones 55
 Elciego 54-5
 Galicia 75
 Haro 55
 Jerez de la Frontera 94
 La Rioja 50-5
 Laguardia 55
 Logroño 54
wolves 98, 205-6
writers

 Amenábar, Alejandro 175
 Aparicio, Juan Pedro 220
 de Cervantes, Miguel 152-5
 Hemingway, Ernest 115, 259, 269, 276

Y

Yegen 225

Z

Zahara de la Sierra 113
Zamorano family 160
Zaragoza 128

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